



RANTS & RAVES

As technology becomes more mobile and allows us to get connected wherever we are, Mel Croucher wonders if we're in danger of cutting ourselves off from the real world

SCORPION'S TALE



**MEL CROUCHER
RAVES**

The sky is as clear and blue here as it was in Marrakech, but now the sweat, sounds and stinks of the city are left far behind. I am staring out of the bus window thinking what a pillock Bob Geldof was for ever writing, "And there won't be snow in Africa, this Christmas time" because there is always flipping snow in flipping Africa at flipping Christmas time. I am surrounded by snow up here in the High Atlas mountains.

However, I fancy I can hear an anomalous noise. It sounds a bit like locusts. Surely you don't get locusts up here above the snow line? Maybe it is a swarm of African cicadas roused from below ground by the prospect of a raving tourist?

I ask the traveller in the seat in front of me if she can hear the cicadas too, but she doesn't reply. Her head is swaying to the mystic insect rhythm, and she is intoning some sacred mantra in communion with the natural wonders all around us. I crane forwards until I can make out the words of her low moaning chant: "He's trying to

make me go to rehab. I won't go, go, go." I have found the source of the strange noise. It is leaking from her MP3 player.

My insect illusion is shattered. I look around for allies, but the other passengers in the bus are oblivious to her antisocial white noise. They, too, are plugged in to their own headsets and electronic devices. Several of them are tapping away at text messages. Others are playing computer games. The rage begins to build inside me. I move to the back of the bus and squeeze in next to a smiling old chap who looks like a struck-off doctor with a whisky habit. But I do not attempt

to begin a conversation. He is squinting and smiling at his laptop computer. I think he's watching *Mr Bean*. I may have to kill him and put him out of my misery.

GONNA TAKEYOU HAYA

Now it is night time. The bus has descended to the High Atlas Foothills of the Ourkira Valley and decanted its payload of me and the Borg beside a Berber settlement. We are near Lalla Haya, which may sound like oral sex but is in fact the source of Morocco's sparkling mineral water. I wish to have social intercourse. I like talking to new people and learning new things from them. Instead, I am bored to tears by a young couple who inflict several hundred high-definition photos of their last holiday on me. I want to discuss this holiday.

Next, I am collared by a benign old witch and suffer video clips on a smartphone showing sundry puppy dogs, pussy cats and grandchildren. Doctor Whisky has changed batteries and is catching up on *The Vicar of Dibley*.



Eventually, I find a melancholy Dutch youth who is willing to talk to me about where we are here and now. He is very disappointed by Morocco, and complains that it takes so long to get anywhere. It was much better when he used Google Earth to plan his trip, and could fly like Superman from the virtual gutters of Marrakech to the virtual Atlas peaks in a matter of seconds.

Cicada Woman becomes hysterical when she discovers to her horror that there is no signal in the village, so she cannot score her fix of music downloads. Suddenly, I am surrounded by feral children demanding I take their photos, for which I must pay them. A goat and a camel mooch silently towards the Sahara looking for more friends to add to their Facebook pages. As for me, I wander away in search of a scorpion.

STARS IN MY EYES

And there it is, beautiful and bright, between Libra and Sagittarius, smack dab in the dust of the Milky

Way: my very own constellation. I don't need a computer to teach me the map of the heavens. My granddad taught me on clear nights like this. I don't want to use software to simulate flying around the planet so I can drop in at any coordinates and read someone else's twaddle. I want to experience it all first hand and conjure up my own twaddle.

Are these people on the bus incapable of experiencing the world without deliberately cutting themselves off from it, in the form of electronic comfort blankets? What are they afraid of if their favourite music, photographs, contact lists, videos and computer games are not continually available? Although I have an intense interest in computers and have made my living producing computerised entertainments, it is people and places that interest me more. Anyway, if computers were more miraculous than people, they would have invented us, not the other way round. For several of my fellow travellers, perhaps that is exactly what has happened, and they are no more than the sum of all that computerised flim-flam stuffed in their pockets and bum bags.

OVER THE HILL

Back in Marrakech, the tech-toys belonging to other people do not feel as intrusive as before, and I hope all those plugged-in folk on the bumpy bus have a safe onward journey to wherever it is they are heading. I manage to check all the emails in my inbox that have accumulated since I last logged on, and I am satisfied that the spam has been frittered and the junk has been dumped. I even allow myself to have a good laugh at some banal photos beamed to me by far-flung family and friends.

I pay the fat bloke with the orange-stained teeth who has a sideline in snake-charming. There's not a lot of money in snake-charming these days. Instead, he makes his real money from computer users like me, which is why he runs this internet café. Sordid little huts like his, with their impossible internet connections, allow me to submit this month's *Rants & Raves* right now, right here, from the gigantic square that is Djemaa el-Fna, which is probably the greatest outdoor spectacle in the world.

Forget my rants and forgive my grouchiness. This is really a rave. I actually love what technology allows me to do. I love computers, I love the web and I even love the foibles of my fellow geeks. All is forgiven. As-Salamu Alaykum.

COLD COMFORT



MEL CROUCHER
RANTS

I am away from home, forced to stay in a pretentious, dreary hotel near an airport, and I'm having the first setback of my journey. I am not an argumentative person, and I don't like raised voices at all, so instead of punching the smirk off the face of the bastard behind the reception desk, I lean forward until my grizzled chops nearly touch his downy excuse for a beard and I give him one of my 'looks'.

All I want to do is use my trusty little notebook to check some items on the web and clear my emails before I head off in the morning. But the hotel is trying to extort 15 quid out of me for an internet connection, and I refuse to pay such a ludicrous ransom for what should be included in the cost of my room. Like the towels, the soap and the suffocating radiator.

The weather is bitter, but not as bitter as me, as I walk the streets like one of the Magi, carrying not gold, frankincense or myrrh, but a carbon-fibre Sony Vaio. Neither am I following a star. I am following the vain ambition of finding an unsecured wireless hotspot in this pitiful excuse for a 21st-century British suburb.

Are the citizens hereabouts so paranoid that they must join in a conspiracy with the hotel to deny me open access? Do they all have the 1990 Computer Misuse Act and 2003 Communications Act tattooed on their pig-like hides? Do they slouch around a sacrificial bonfire when news arrives that 11 people have so far been arrested for 'stealing' someone else's broadband connection remotely? Do they realise that it's not piggybacking on unsecured wireless connections that causes problems, but their own stupidity in having an unsecured computer?

No, it is none of these things. It is that they are all a bunch of miserable, mean sociopaths. They are the sort of people who start grunting in a pretend foreign language when a beggar asks them if they have any small change to spare. I do not want their small change. I want to use a minuscule bit of their unused bandwidth, which, as they are not using it themselves, is free.

WE HAD A DREAM

Access to the internet was not supposed be like this. I can remember when all sorts of organisations were getting together to create WiFi open cities, created by the agreement of loads of

ordinary people to leave their wireless connections open. It was to have been the equivalent of public street-lighting, instead of hiring your own servant to walk a few paces in front carrying a flaming torch. It was to have been the equivalent of municipal clocks, instead of forcing everyone to buy their own pocket watch. And it was to have been the equivalent of free public libraries, free eye tests, free dentists, free education and free love. Well, maybe not free love, but certainly a complimentary grope.

Norwich led the way in the UK, when it bolted hundreds of antennae to municipal lampposts and created free WiFi coverage throughout the city. Conurbations from Seoul to Seattle did the same, and became magnets for enterprise, commerce and people with broken noses who were too engrossed to look where they were going. Then both the government and the media started sowing the seeds of fear, citing identity theft and online porn and terrorist hackers and all the rest of the hogwash that enters your life only if you are stupid enough to invite it in with open electronic arms.

Somehow the thought of a stranger using your wireless internet connection became corrupted by the sort of mentality that believes a foreigner has no place in 'your' country. The concept of the social benefits of sharing and mutual responsibility is now regarded as mad, bad and dangerous to show. First create the bitterness and fear, and then you make all those bitter, fearful people pay for something that was meant to be free in the first place.

FREEDOM PASS

Thank you to the young Chinese businessman named Mr Wenjie, who lends me his laptop when I return, cold and disheartened, to my hotel lobby. He recommends that I pay the equivalent of £2.50 a month to www.mobilitypass.com for a high-speed mobile connection in 160 countries. He selects from BT Openzone, T Mobile and The Cloud, and trusts me to plug a memory stick into his machine.

I will now buy him a drink, maybe more than one, but not here. There is no way I'm going to give these extortionists any more of my money, and I'll be damned if I'll pay the prices they're asking in this hotel bar. Mr Wenjie tells me there is a nice little pub round the corner, in the opposite direction to where my wanderings have recently taken me. He also says they have a free WiFi connection, but did not want to tell me before in case it upset me. ☹